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ABSTRACT

Discussion focuses on teachers' beliefs and values as they relate to working with young children. Specific attention is given to (1) whether the reported blurring of the boundaries between child-life and adult-life has affected the education of young children; (2) parental pressure to provide very young children with persistently optimal experiences; (3) changing children to fit the curriculum, rather than changing programs to meet the needs of children; (4) stress-related symptoms seen in young children; (5) the importance of investigating how children learn, as opposed to what they learn; (6) the effect of different approaches to the kindergarten curriculum on children's retention of gains; (7) the uses of play and unstructured materials for the development of young children; (8) learning to read and write; (9) differences in the ways two teachers implemented their values and beliefs in different contexts of administrative priorities; (10) support for the personal development of teachers as professionals; and (11) the problem of very low salaries in the field of early childhood education. (RH)

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Oregon Joint Conference on Early Childhood Education

March 7, 1987

"Balancing Priorities for Children"- Keynote Address

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This is my first trip to Oregon and I am delighted that this conference marks that occasion. It gives me great pleasure to be sharing my thoughts with you today.

Balancing priorities for children-what an awesome subject!

I have had great difficulty paring down the the topics that would adequately address this issue -- there are so many! Years ago-and I am referring to the days in which my 87 year old mother first taught-balancing the teacher's private life against her public life was a significant priority. It was critical, my mother told me, never to appear in public, in those days, in the company of a "suitable suitor." Your life is an open book, she warned, and for that reason admonished me not to become a teacher. Obviously, I not did take her advice. Today we wrestle with uncounted variables as we sift out our priorities--none of which are those my mother faced.

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I will focus my remarks today on belifes and values as they relate to working with young children. I have a particular bias, of course. My viewpoint is a developmenmtal one, my perspective is shaped by my belief that children's interactions with the animate and inanimate enviroment are central to their learning and growth. I believe in emphasizing the learner rather than only what is to be learned.

A discussion of balancing priorities forces us to think about today's young children. Are they different? Have they changed? How do they learn? What do they need? In a recent paper on the changing American child, Herbert Zimiles (1982) distilled the comments of 170 teachers of middle class children of kindergarten through high school age. These teachers had each been in the classroom for over 20 years. One of the most powerful change agents named, which will surprise no one, is television. A task force of the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that by the time children have graduated from high school they will have spent more time watching T.V. than attending school, resulting in, among other things, obesity, lack of physical fitness and a distorted view of life (N.Y. Times, 1/21/87).

The teachers in Zimiles' study described today's children as knowing more, at least on the surface, as more independent and as more verbal than pre-television children. They thought

kindergartners nowadays seem to resemble the first and second graders of years ago. Because of television, children are included in aspects of the adult world that were closed to them 25 or 30 years ago. Perhaps that is why they seem to be growing up more rapidly. "Some of the mystery and the difference between the life of the child and the adult no longer obtains," Zimiles observes (p.41).

As a result, have teachers and parents changed their beliefs about young children? Has this lead us to choose the importance of skill learning over content and concepts?; the learning of answers over the process of solving a problem? Has this reported blurring of the boundaries between child-life and adult-life contributed to the current pressure to teach formal academics in kindergartens and preschools? In his book The Disappearance of Childhood, Neil Postman (1982) notes that children's exposure to adult "secrets" serves to push them pell mell into the adults' realm. He writes "that the electric media find it impossible to withold any secrets," and "without secrets", he adds" there can be no such thing as childhood." (p.80) Do we, today's adults, believe that childhood has really disappeared and that we can do nothing to stem the tide? Do we regard children as miniature forms of ourselves because they are privy to information formerly witheld from them?

I clearly remember many years ago when my now grown daughters used to dash home from elementary school to watch the "soaps" with their sitter. I found myself explaining to them such words as "impotence," "artificial insemination," "patricide," and "infidelity" at an age when I deemed it inappropriate. "Television allows children to hear and see news of world conflicts, violence, and danger at the same time and in the same manner as their parents and not when and how their parents choose to communicate this information to them," Zimiles states (p.27). Many parents are unprepared for their children's early and rapid movement into their world and may misinterpret their children's sophisticated language for real knowledge. In the Zimiles study the rise in divorce, in single parent families and in women working outside the home was linked with less adult reliability in the lives of children or further widening of the gap between children and childhood.

Balancing priorities in this situation seems to call for standing on our heads. Can we educators help parents to limit their children's exposure to television while also enabling their children to become critical viewers? Can we educate parents to help their children understand the difference between the commercials and the program and know that commercials are designed to sell a product? Can we help children think about t.v. presentations that distort reality? Since most parents of young children were themselves reared on media this is a formidable task.

Are we adults too impatient to get children on the fast track? Are we unable to look at children "from inside out" as Dorothy Cohen advised (Cohen, Stern & Balaban, 1983)? Do we fail to see their sqirming, wiggling, jumping, reaching, touching as their special and positive way of learning? I am heartboken when adults look past children instead of at them. How else to explain the two well educated parents, who, after visiting the Bank Street Family Center for Infants, Toddlers and Twos with the object of enrolling their 18 month old daughter, told me that they were disappointed not to find a computer there. What was it that led them to think that a computer was a suitable activity for a one and half year old toddler? This may appear to be an extreme example, but I don't think so. A few years ago, one of my students was conducting a parents' workshop for mothers of 9 month olds. The mothers' question was not whether their infants should watch television, but which programs. Certainly we need to be cognizant of this technological presence, but are we losing sight of the child? Is the balance becoming unbalanced?

Lately, I have become aware of a trend that I've facetiously dubbed "change the child." If the child doesn't fit the program, then change the child. It seems that kindergartens have been incorporating more of the pencil and paper work that used to be the province of the first grade. And now pre-K's are catching the "pencil and paper" fever.

Pregnant women are even encouraged to read to their in-utero fetus. But when the program becomes too advanced for the four or five year old, the advice given to parents is hold your child back a year. There seems to be no thought given to designing the program to fit the child. This is a priority that many educators and parents are now espousing. It bears our attention.

Many schools are encouraging a change in the age of entrance to kindergarten. I find this trend ironic because it derives from a train of thought based on a series of false assumptions such as: Children are developing more rapidly. They need to learn earlier. So we must make kindergarten and nursery programs more academic. However, a lot of children are having difficulties with learning the skills we teach. Therefore, we will solve this problem by pushing up the kindergarten entrance age rather than examining the content of the programs we are offering young children.

According to a report in the New York Times (11/20/86) more than half the states have moved up their entrance age requirements. Many schools are urging parents not to send their children to kindergarten unless they are at least 5 years 6 months of age. In New York City, an informal survey revealed that many kindergartens in private schools used workbooks and taught writing, phonics and reading skills as well as computers.

These programs have become too stressful for many young children because their design and content are out of sync with the nature of about-to-be five and five year olds. This is illustrated by a recent study of children who started kindergarten before their fifth birthday. Upoff & Gilmore (1985) found that these early entrance children made up 75% of the upper grade failures. Their academic problems - lower scores on tests, failures, referrals for learning disabilities - often persisted throughout their school careers. In contrast, another group with the same June through October birthdays, who delayed starting kindergarten by one year, accounted for none of the failures.

It is clear that the older children did better because the program was more suited to them. The kindergarten was no longer a kindergarten. The children weren't the problem; the program was the problem.

Too much, too soon for too many young children say the researchers. According to another study (Soderman, quoted by Upoff & Gilmore, 1985) The American Academy of Pediatricians has expressed concern about the dramatic increase of stress-related symptoms seen in young children. In fact, the above mentioned news article from the New York Times, featured a box, headline "Stress Signals in Kindergartners" advising parents to pay close attention to the child who:

*insists either that the school work is too hard or boring

*says that he or she has no friends

*says that he or she does not want to go to school

*constantly asks the teacher if it is time to go home

*reverts to thumb sucking, infantile speech, nail biting or bed wetting

In his keynote address at the Fall 1986 conference in Washington, D.C. of the National Association or the Education of Young Children, president elect David Elkind warned that pushing 3, 4 and 5 year olds was leading to childhood stress, depression and learning problems. Children in classroms where there was a back-to-basics to curriculum were found in a study at the Univ. of Rochester, to be turned off from learning altogether even though their achievement scores were higher (New York Times 10/7/86).

Granting priority to earlier and earlier academic preparation which culminates in "teach your baby to read" must be re-evaluated by those who have chosen it. In a somewhat perverse way, I think that development has "won out" because kindergarten has become "too hard" for kindergartners. Will we begin once more to look at the child in order to design the program? Will priorities balance in favor of the child?

What do we believe about children? Do we agree with Jean, a teacher whose work is examined in great depth by Margaret Yonemura, that children bring a wealth of knowledge to school with them."? (p.26) Do we believe that children push from within to learn from the very moment of their birth? Do we believe that children's passion for autonomy and for making

things happen in their environment constitute the core of the learner? Do we set our priorities on what we believe?

We are asked continually these days to think about what young children learn when we should be examing how they learn. How do children construct their knowledge of the world and people? How do children become literate? How do children learn mathematics? Many voices out there would have us believe that it is through drill, through worksheets, through computers.

In recent article, Williams & Kamii (1985) remind us that mindless manipulation of objects is not the way that children learn. Rather they obtain two kinds of knowledge through manipulation of objects in situations that are personally meaningful and in which there are opportunities for them to make decisions. They obtain physical knowledge of an object's characteristics - smoothness, roughness, sharpness - and logicomathematical knowledge by mentally constructing relationship between objects - smaller than, larger than, heavier than, four, seven. (Williams & Kamii, 1985). To accomplish such mental growth children need time. They need to be in contact with a wide variety of well chosen materials, playthings and of course, peers. The authors write, "when teachers correct worksheets, children learn that the teacher is the only one who determines which answers are right" (p. 26).

What do we value? The correct answer or the process of solving the problem? What do we believe? That the child is a pitcher into which we pour information or a persistent builder of bridges from questions to answers? A report on early childhood education issued by the New York State Commissioner of Education praised a study by Miller & Bizzel that showed that while children who attended kindergartens where the curriculum stressed drill and practice scored impressively on initial tests, they did not for the most part retain these gains. On the other hand, children who attended programs that emphasized strengthening attitudes toward learning, fostering creativity, and providing time for exploration and experimentation showed less impressive gains but greater benefits over long periods of time. (p.3)

I recently had one of those "ah ha!" experiences myself. I know about floating and sinking-at least I assumed that I did but some friends and I needed to create an extra step in a swimming pool to aid a disabled person to get out more easily. To that end, we tried to place a platic crate used for milk containers under the pool ladder. To our amazement the crate didn't sink. "It weighs less than the water," my friend commented. He put two crowbars through the crate and set it in place at the bottom of the pool. This event must seem very

obvious to all of you but to me, the concept of water as a material with weight suddenly made an old truth into a new discovery and I understood more clearly why the disabled person, whose back was injured, felt more comfortable in water where he weighed relatively less than in air. Subsequently I came to understand the concept of displacement in water. If I need to learn this way- still - surely children need it even more, and with more time, and with more more experiences. Perhaps adults have lost touch with thier own learning- and don't like to admit this kind of re-understanding because it's too embarrassing.

What do we believe about the uses of play and unstructed materials for the growth and development of young childern? Can we advocate these seemingly old-fashioned beliefs in the face of the glitter of technolgy?

Writing about computer use in early childhood education, Harriet K. Cuffaro (1984) likens them to workbooks. She uses the example of learning directionality- up, down; in, out; right, left. Computers, she writes, "are far removed from the situations in which directionality is learned and named." (p.562) Young children, she reminds us, learn these concepts through their interactions with the enviroment- crawling under tables, climbing on jungle gyms, bumping into, getting out of the way, of and playing with, other children .

How do children learn to read and write? Must they be led by the nose? Does the magnetic pull of television dull their interest?

Little children want to write (Graves, 1982; Gibson, 1976). It is their most legitimate method of entering the adult province. Three year olds have been found to label writing as different from drawing on their own crayoned works.

Very recently, I watched three year old Amelia making "signs" for some Lego constructions that were placed on a windowsill in her classroom. She took folded cards from a box near the block corner on which her teacher had printed words formerly dictated by the 3 year old block builders. With the pen that the teacher kept in the box for that purpose Amelia "wrote" in circular scribbles on several cards. "What are you writing?" I asked her. She answered me seriously in a cadence like reading. "Nobody do anything. Nobody do anything, none." Then she explained to me that her writing is "scripting", unlike her teacher's manuscript printing.

In too many instances children come to school eager to write, only to be told that their scribbles, their invented spellings, their upside down letters are not acceptable, and that writing is something arduous that you do in a workbook, in a certain way, between the lines. In our zeal to educate young children in adult fashion are we killing instead of building up the childhood of children?

To learn to read, young children need to explore and experiment with words and with writing in much the same way that they interact with blocks, paint and clay. Reading is not a mechanical process; it involves garnering meaning from the printed page. Children need "meaningful interactions with print" (Kontos, 1986, p. 64).

Children learn to read in a "literacy rich environment" (Kontos, 1985; Schickendanz, 1985) composed of massive does of storybook reading and rereading, looking at and handling books, dictating stories and writing with the techer in many different forms such as lists, messages and memos. In her book More than ABC's: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing, Judith Schickendanz suggests that paper and pencils be kept in the dramatic play area and that labels, signs and charts of all sorts be used throughout the classroom.

In Amelia's classroom the teacher makes signs for children's block buildings and saves the signs in a small box for their re-use. The signs were serious statements of the childrens' self:

Sam wrote: Don't knock it down.
Don't bring it home.
Don't break it.
Don't take it off.

Sarah wrote: I made an important building and not big people could go under it.

It is broad knowledge about print that children need to acquire before they move on to letter identificaion and letter-sound correspondence (Kontos, 19856.) Literacy begins in infancy with what Sally Provence calls a "social speaking partner." It develops in a context of adults who use reading and writing in their daily lives and who enjoy books of their own as well as reading to children.

I asked two teachers of 5 and 6 year olds how they balanced priorities in their classroom. L. teaches in an urban private school where she has been for several years. M. teaches in a suburban public school. She has over 20 years of experience. They spoke about children learning to write and read. Both expressed the belief that formal reading should not begin until children were six or seven but both did more formal work on a one to one basis with children who demonstrated their readiness to read by their interest, their ability to pay attention and sit still for a period of time and their skill at identifying letters and sounds.

These two teachers face different administrative priorities. M. said that workbooks were the administration's priorities while playtime where children learn to work together as well as on their own were her priorities.

Since the administration is less likely toi get on the back of more experienced teachers like herself, M. holds off using the workbooks until December, so that the children have significant opportunity to use hands-on materials, manipulatives and their bodies. L's priorities and the administration's are more congruent; neither value workbooks.

Both teachers based their decisions about children on their belief that children were learners and that they needed adult help to develop as learners and to become socially cooperative. L. encourages children write early in the year. Two afternoons a week she schedules "writers workshop" in which children use their invented spelling or drawings in order to say what they wish to set down. She supports this effort in many different ways: by taking dictated stories, by writing lists with children and by posting written materials related to the children's activities in many parts of the room. She is

serious about their written products.

But L's priorities are blocks. Every week the 5 and 6 year old children plan and construct a block city. They play in it all week and put it away on Friday. They learn how to consturct a social environment based on cooperation and they work to conceptualize how a city works, what its needs are, how its problems are solved. These are skills that budding readers need.

It's not enough to KNOW that children learn through mainipulating objects, through their own spontaneous dramatic play, through their interactions with other children and the environment if you don't also BELIEVE it - and ACT on it.

It's not enough to know that young children learn deeply through their own experimentation, their own wrong answers, their own temporary inabilities if teachers don't hear what children say and listen seriously. I watched a first grade teacher talking with a girl who was building a supermarket in the block area. "How does the food get into the store?" the teacher asked her. "Well, the trucks drive up this ramp to the roof and throw the food down. People catch it and take it inside." "I see," the teacher commented, "Suppose the delivery is eggs. Then what?" The child sat back, looked intently at the teacher, took a deep breath and said, "Could you please

help somebody else?" Having stirred up the waters, the teacher withdrew. Later on we saw the girl tape two blocks together and push them, truck-like, to the door of the market. "Eggs comin' in," she called to those inside.

This teacher knew how a first grader thinks. She also believed that this is how a first grader learns. By what means do teachers arrive at priorities? Teaching does not always lend itself to reflection - mostly because we teachers are too busy teaching. Surface activities are very consuming and often teachers do not realizes that below that surface lies a rich mine of experiences, feelings and beliefs - the real force that motivates our behavior. In her new book, A Teacher at Work (1986), Margaret Yonemura investigates these "invisible presences" (she is quoting Virginia Woolf) that influence the stream of one teachers teaching. Jean, the teacher, believed that children "are not wildflowers that grow without human intervention (p.32)." Her beliefs about children and her beliefs about herself as a teacher and decision maker fed her teaching actions. How can we as teacher and teacher educators reflect more deeply on our own beliefs and values to know where the well springs of our teaching decisions lie? Recently I had occasion to speak with a techer who was concerned about her inability to be appropriately firm with a 2 1/2 year old. As we explored this question, she recalled that her own teachers yelled at children who did not obey the rules. She was

frightened when they yelled and/so always did what she was told. When she misbehaved at home her mother yealled, too, and she cried. Recalling this caused her eyes to mist. Not wanting to be a yelling teacher, she had not yet found the way to be firm. In examining the kind of teacher she wished be, she also had to examine the process of getting there. Because she is presently in a supportive learning environment, she will be able to refine her views of the child, her views of herself and her beliefs. She will be able eventually to answer the question I recently heard a youngster ask his teacher: "Laura, why are you growing up to be a teacher?" The more we teachers feel supported in our growth and development, the more we will be able to support the children in our care and their parents. Are these the prioities for the 80's?

In closing, I wish to raise a prioity issue for all teachers and child care providers that profoundly affects young children. It is the issue of dramatically low salaries in the early childhood field. A recent report in the Child Care Action News reveals that women who provide child care earn less than bartenders, parking lot attendants and zookeepers (Whitebook, 1986). In Westchester County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, 20% of the child care

providers qualify for public assistance. A study being conducted by Anne Mitchell at Bank Street College, surveyed pre-K programs in 2773 school districts. It was found that paraprofessionals -- many of whom were required to have either high school diplomas or equivalency degrees; working 30 to 35 hours a week, 40 weeks a year -- were earnig an average of $7,000 a year. (Report on Preschool Programs, 12/10/86, pg. 7). While the needs for child care are presently expanding, the turnover rate is alarmingly high. A recent survey of child care in New York State found a 40% annual turnover rate for techers, assistant teachers and aides. (New York Times, 11/ /86). Low salaries not only drive people out of the profession but serve as a subsidy for the entire child care delivery system. When a society's priorities place children and their care at the low end of the scale, we need to make our voices heard. It seems to me that children are our priority and we need to carry out our commitment to children not only in the classroom but beyond it.

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